

COMMUNITY FORUM

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LETTERS • OPINIONS

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The right vote

■ Council backs resurrected bill to collect on ambulance rides

The County Council made the right call Tuesday in approving County Executive Isiah Leggett's proposal to resurrect a controversial "fee" for ambulance service — despite the fact that voters overturned a similar measure through referendum in 2010.

OUR OPINION

Opponents of the bill — which consist mostly of volunteer fire companies whose members fear the legislation will soften their ability to raise money — have pledged to again take the measure to referendum.

However, if the bill does go to referendum in November, voters likely will approve it this time. The firmer, 6-to-3 support of the council for the measure, along with a promised effort by Leggett to better inform the public what the bill actually does — as opposed to what opponents claim it does — should be enough to convince voters they have nothing to fear.

As several council supporters of the bill made clear before the vote, the term "fee" is a misnomer. Montgomery County residents already pay for ambulance service through their taxes and through the premiums they pay to health insurers.

The bill will not require county residents having to cough up cash for an ambulance ride. It merely allows the county government to seek reimbursement from insurance companies for the cost of ambulance rides, just as hospitals seek reimbursement from insurers for treating patients.

Nearly all of Montgomery's neighboring jurisdictions collect such reimbursements for ambulance service, while Montgomery effectively leaves that money sitting on the table. The only people who would directly pay for ambulance rides in Montgomery would be out-of-county residents who have no insurance, though they would be eligible for a hardship waiver.

Billing insurers would generate roughly \$72 million over the next four fiscal years that the county otherwise wouldn't collect, according to the executive's office. That money would go to

the county's fire and rescue service.

Critics of the bill — particularly County Councilmember Phil Andrews — have accused Leggett of disregarding or circumventing the people's will by reintroducing the bill less than 18 months after voters rejected it.

But Leggett rightly pointed out when he resurrected the measure in April that the county's fiscal situation has changed since the vote. Most importantly, Montgomery is facing the cost of shouldering a larger chunk of the cost of public teacher pensions, which the state historically has paid.

(The General Assembly was working out the details of the pension shift in this week's special session in Annapolis; during the regular General Assembly session, Leggett estimated the shift would cost Montgomery \$125 million in the next three fiscal years.)

In explaining their vote on the bill, several supporters on the council said they were swayed by amendments Leggett offered that would create an education campaign designed to explain the legislation to residents and a patient advocate in the Office of Consumer Affairs to handle complaints and service problems related to the reimbursement.

Several also criticized what they called a "misinformation" campaign opponents mounted during the 2010 referendum battle that sought to convince voters that passage of the bill would mean that residents would be forced to pay out-of-pocket fees for ambulance rides.

Leggett clearly learned lessons from the bruising referendum battle of 2010 and this time made an effort to meet some of the opponents concerns and to ensure that residents are clear about what the bill achieves — and, just as importantly, what it doesn't.

Kudos to the council for not bending to the false assertion that passage of this bill somehow subverts democracy in Montgomery County.